

Exhibit explores spiritual journeys

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The work of Montgomery County artists Tom Block and Michael Enn Sirvet is at the District's Hamiltonian Gallery as part of the fifth of its series of exhibits of Hamiltonian Fellowship winners, along with paintings by their "mentor artist" Lisa Montag Brotman of Bethesda.

Wrapping around the gallery's back walls are the 25 mixed media panels comprising Block's "Conference of the Birds." Each panel is 6 feet high, and together they measure 62.5 feet wide. Thus, Block's work, which, at these dimensions, becomes a kind of wall itself, fills the viewer's visual field with what at first may appear to be a chaotic jumble of brightly colored graffiti-like marks. In fact, it is a very carefully orchestrated series of images echoing the allegorical quest of 30 birds in the spiritual epic of the same name written by the Persian Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar in 1177.

Block has become something of a comparative theologian in the past decade or so, publishing scholarly articles on the relationship between Sufism and Jewish mysticism. He has delved extensively into Sufi thinking about the path to enlightenment, the obstacles along the way and its equivocal end where "drunk on God," the pilgrim finds that God is within. The idea of God within is an idea intrinsic to interpretations of Sufism dating back to the roots of Islam.

What Block has done here is reinterpret the poem in a pictorial sequence taking place in the urban setting, and featuring the artist. Executed on canvas, it exhibits an amazing density of painted and pasted elements, paper sketches in ink and pencil, and acrylic, gold and silver paint. These are layered, drawn and re-drawn. Sometimes, collaged elements are torn and reworked. Handwritten text, with references to everything from current events to the Kabbalah, appears everywhere, requiring the viewer to get up close to and get lost in the surface.

The translation of the spiritual journey, with its didactic stations, into contemporary street imagery takes it out of the exclusive religious context of its source and universalizes it. Thus, at the end (the work "reads" like a scroll from left to right),,, hands point back the other way — back into the world. For Block, the aim of classical mystical enlightenment is wrong. For him, rather than sit in perfect contemplation, the goal of knowledge is action. The meaning here is about returning to the world with the benefit of wisdom gained.

Claudia Rousseau, GA, April 8, 2009